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Chapter Eighteen: Angelique X

May, 2030

"We eat out of necessity. If we could choose, we likely wouldn't spend time feeding ourselves, Angel. But things are as they are, and we need energy to move."

"We have to eat."

"Yes, we have to. If our circumstances were even a little better, we could afford to factor taste into the equation, but we must prioritize nutrients over flavor."

"I don't get it. So..."

"But that doesn't mean we can't take whatever alternatives we can to make the meat more enjoyable if it doesn't take too much time or resources."

I said this while immersing a skinned rabbit into boiling water, inside a small pot over a campfire. I was squatting in front of the flames, while Angelique watched me, seated on a stone a few meters away. It was a hot night, with not a single cloud covering the stars.

"Boiled meat is... too bland for my taste, but if you take the boiled meat and roast it afterward, you get a much better result."

"I have tried that."

"Yes, I know. But today I'm asking you

to pay a bit more attention, so you can do it yourself someday. Look, if you boil the meat before roasting it, it will end up tender and soft no matter what. It takes more time, but in my opinion, it's worth it. We have salt, and that will suffice. Some spices would help, but that's asking too much."

"Hm... oh, Alez."

"Yes?"

"Do you remember about... a week ago, I think, when we were leaving Senica? I saw something that caught my attention, but I forgot to mention it."

"What was it? Was it important? If it was important, you know I'll have to scold you."

"No, no. It just... sparked my curiosity because you saw it too."

"Oh..."

"You saw it but ignored it, as if it were an everyday thing."

"..."

"Those people... what was all that,

Alez?"

The fire crackled.

I used a dry branch to bring the smaller, scattered pieces of wood to the center of the campfire before responding.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her stand up and move closer.

"That was a commune, Angel."

December, 2030

"Whatever you do, don't show your gun, Angelique. Everyone here is armed, even if they don't look it."

"Being here is..."

"It's not dangerous. It's not dangerous as long as you stick to certain rules. They probably already suspect we have weapons too, but no one will shoot us unless they perceive us as hostile."

A middle-aged woman with short white

hair was sweeping the front of her house with a straw broom that was on the verge of breaking. A guy about my age was walking down the street, smiling, pushing a cart loaded with all sorts of items—from food to clothes. Inside what used to be a restaurant, an old man was assessing objects that others brought him, assigning them a value to determine how many bags of homemade flour they could be traded for.

Communes are not all the same, but they share some common elements. It's strictly forbidden to attack anyone, regardless of their side, within a commune. The inhabitants themselves enforce this rule, and none of them will hesitate to take down anyone who threatens the fragile peace within.

"Did you know there was a commune here, Alez?"

"No, but I suspected it."

"Why?"

"Because of the geographical location

and the fact that the city is, relatively speaking, intact. In the months we've been living here, we haven't seen any military patrols. No one seems interested in reclaiming this place, and that's exactly what Amere seeks."

The place was alive. The avenue chosen as the main street by the residents was bustling with at least two dozen people at a time, while many others could be seen in the houses and other buildings. Some were doing business, others working, and others simply trying to lead a somewhat normal life.

Communes are created by Amere, usually in places away from capitals. They are urban centers where no more than one or two hundred people live, who could have been inhabitants from the start or installed later by Amere. I didn't understand it until it was explained to me, but these sites are of great importance to Amere. No one here is a trained soldier or an agent prepared to gather information; instead, they are civilians allowed the

luxury of having a permanent roof over their heads and a community to rely on. In return, they become Amere's eyes and ears.

Once every one or two months, Amere sends a large shipment of food, clothes, medicine, and ammunition from one of their many bases in each country, distributing it among all these people. However, deliberately, the amount each inhabitant of the commune receives is always very low, forcing them to create an internal market to meet each one's demands. Many of the scavengers you encounter while walking out there could be commune members gathering items to trade with others. Others, with different skills, grow their own food, make homemade weapons, or do whatever they are good at. Amere prohibits the use of money or any monetary sign in the communes, allowing only barter. Communes found trying to use bullets or anything else as currency were burned, and all their members executed.

"What will we do here?"

"Make ourselves seen and known. Communes are important and have no qualms about trading or providing temporary shelter to travelers."

"... we are not that far from the house."

"Far enough that no one here has seen or looted it before. They must be an established population. They will be our main supplier. If things go bad, we can always come here and get food in exchange for all those clothes we have at home and don't use. Or in exchange for books, we have plenty of those too."

I felt a fleeting inquisitive look from my left, which was gone by the time I turned to meet it. Angelique wasn't going to let me get rid of the books.

People looked at us as we passed, though none gave us dirty looks. In such small communities, newcomers stand out like a mud stain on a white shirt, so it's expected to be the main focus of attention. We walked almost fifty meters down the

center of that street, surrounded by cheerful people and houses well-kept enough to make you forget how ruined the rest of the city was. When I saw what I was hoping to find, I placed my hand on Angelique's shoulder.

"There. Up ahead, that big tent in the square. Can you see all those boxes? That must be the distribution center that handles what Amere brings to the commune. If we get closer..."

"There is a man there, sitting in front of a table. He's... exchanging bags and boxes with other people."

"It's the commune's own market working as it should. There are many, many boxes... Amere must have been here recently. Good, let's go. If we have time, we'll try to make a trade today, just to introduce ourselves as new customers."

"Alez."

When I took a step forward, Angel's voice stopped me, but she didn't speak

again when our eyes met. I knew that look: Angelique disagreed with me, but didn't feel capable of saying it. Something about my reasoning didn't convince her, and she was willing enough to confront me to get my attention, but not enough to explain it in her own words. Her blue eyes glanced at the square and then back at me. By now, understanding this girl and her quirks is a skill in itself.

"You don't want to go."

She simply shook her head gently, making the black strands of her hair brush her shoulders. I lifted my head slightly and saw, a few meters ahead, a girl of about twenty helping an old man carry supplies into what I assumed was his home. I looked back at the girl in front of me.

"You don't think it's a good idea to get involved with these people."

"They are protected by Amere. It would be best if they never saw us again."

I couldn't help but show a small smile. I always find it endearing when Angelique voices an opinion different from mine.

"Why?"

"Amere is our enemy, and they will not hesitate to raid our home if they find out we're occupying it. Besides..."

"Besides?"

"It just doesn't feel right to make deals with them."

I wanted to let the silence fill the spaces our conversation left, but voices and occasional laughter prevented it. Angelique is determined. Someone as conservative as she is will have no trouble surviving on her own. She might even get better results than I do, but if she's ever returned to society, she'll have too many problems getting along with others. I hope to be there to guide her a bit.

"You're not entirely wrong, but you missed some things."

I saw both of Angelique's hands slip into the pockets of her jacket when I said those words. I'd say that's her way of saying 'okay, if you really know so much, explain where I'm wrong.'

"We're not significant enough targets for Amere to send a team after us. Sure, like anyone else who isn't one of them, if they find us on the street they'll shoot us without a second thought, but they wouldn't plan an assault like that, risking resources and personnel, just to kill two survivors who pose no threat. That, and..."

I raised my eyebrows to indicate she should look behind her, and she turned her entire body without any pretense. She saw the same image of the young woman and the old man, and I spoke in a lower voice.

"These people aren't part of Amere,

Angel. They're just people who have no other choice but to serve as resources for the group's purposes. That allows them to live this relatively peaceful life. They're not our enemies. They just want to live quietly, and if they have to comply with Amere's demands to do so, then so be it."

"Hm..."

She fell silent, but didn't look back at me. I couldn't see her face, but I imagined she was thoughtful, or perhaps doubtful. When the old man finally entered his home, the young woman picked up the remaining bags from the ground and our eyes met. After a moment's thought, she offered us a polite smile and nodded, to which I did the same.

"Why don't we stay and live with them?"

"Our situation is..."

Images of a burning city flashed through my mind.

Then I recalled a sea of corpses.

Finally, memories of a pair of brown eyes constantly flattering me surfaced.

And all this happened in the time it took me to blink.

"Our situation is more complicated. We need to stay away from Amere. Come on, I want to—"

"What a lovely girl! Is she your sister?"

A soft voice, speaking slightly broken English, came from maybe two or three meters to my side. Normally, I would have grabbed Angelique's arm and pulled her behind me, but the question took me so by surprise that I could only look in the direction of that woman in her forties or fifties, somewhat dumbfounded.

"Ah, no, she's not..."

Angel reacted similarly, though I could see her eyebrows raised, as if the premise

of someone ever asking us such a question had never crossed her mind.

The woman was tall, almost my height, and wore a long, bulky fuchsia coat. She had notably thick glasses and her hair long and loose, as if she were absolutely sure she didn't need to waste time fixing it to look good. In part, that was true.

"Isn't she? Ah, and here I thought you looked somewhat alike."

Angel and I exchanged glances, silently agreeing that we didn't look alike at all. The woman, who had been hiding her hands behind her back, brought one to her chest and smiled at us with a kindness that felt slightly forced.

"Travelers passing through here aren't very common, but they're not nonexistent either. More common are those who pass through, resupply, and then continue on their way, never to be seen again. But... no, you're not part of that latter group, are

you? No, I suspect this is just the first of many times we'll meet."

"What makes you think that?"

I tried not to sound too hostile with that question, though the woman chuckled softly and tapped her shoe against the ground in the same manner. It was unnerving, in a way. It made me feel like she already knew me, though I didn't know her. As if she had read my entire life in a book and knew everything I had done and gone through.

"Oh, nothing in particular. It's just that you're not carrying a backpack, and the one the girl has is too small to hold things for both of you."

"Maybe we just don't have much to carry."

"You should at least have food and drink for two people. Neither of you looks malnourished, sick, or dehydrated, so I won't believe you if you tell me you have nothing to cover yourselves at night or that

you're lacking provisions."

"We could have just finished our rations right before we found this commune. It's hard to make food last in our conditions."

"No one who can't go a day or two without eating survives out there. These cities fell a long time ago, and by now only the most skilled manage to look as healthy and strong as you two."

"I could tell you we lived in a safe area until not too long ago and were forced to escape. Northern Germany is still standing."

"A French girl and a young German—no, Austrian, who aren't family, fleeing east instead of going north? Sounds strange, considering Denmark hasn't entirely fallen either."

"... How did you...?"

"I used to travel a lot before the war, I recognize many languages and accents."

She had been listening to us talk before she caught our attention.

I partly enjoyed the exchange the woman subjected me to. Angelique followed the bounces of our conversation like someone watching a tennis match, while I tried to leave her without words once and for all; at that point, more for entertainment than necessity. It was evident that this woman was a huge problem—more so if I decided to make her my enemy.

"Besides, you need space to carry ammunition for your weapons."

I paused briefly, focusing on the woman's eyes and her benevolent smile.

"We don't—"

"Yes, you are armed. In fact, each of you has at least one weapon."

Feeling internally defeated, I couldn't maintain the same friendly demeanor any longer and swallowed before speaking in a slightly quieter tone.

"How do you know?"

"The girl straightened her back when I mentioned ammunition. I'm sure you told her not to show she was armed within the commune. You're smart, and maybe also very experienced. Well done. As for you... young man, even when talking to a harmless lady like myself, you don't remove your right hand from the edge of your coat, nor do you stop touching the metal of the zipper with your index and thumb. You've trained yourself to be able to draw your weapon in the shortest time possible, and that's admirable."

I felt a shiver run down my spine, and my fingers indeed closed around the edge of my coat. I can say that until that very moment, I wasn't aware of that small detail in my posture.

As for the woman... if she wasn't the leader of the commune, I'm sure it was simply because she didn't want to be. She exuded experience and observational skills, just her alone would be such a valuable

resource for Amere that I wondered why they'd leave her in this sad commune instead of using her for espionage or even worse tasks. I don't know if she read my mind or not, but the corners of her lips curved into a smile that exuded a bit of cheekiness. I couldn't help but smile back, though I imagine mine radiated certain airs of defeat.

One thing became extremely clear to me about this woman with long, loose hair: she was a good person, but she was dangerous. It was better to stay on her good side.

"I give up. I feel like if I keep talking, you'll get more information out of me than I want to share."

"Alez—"

"We're no longer travelers; we've settled nearby."

I placed my hand on Angelique's head when she looked my way, trying to intervene. If this woman made me

nervous, Angel surely wanted to flee that very moment.

"I understand. Welcome to our commune. You can stay as long as you like, as long as you don't cause trouble. Although, I know I don't need to explain that to you, right, Alez?"

"Yes, this isn't my first time visiting a commune."

"That's evident. My name is Irena Egorova, it's a pleasure. I'm the assistant to the commune leader, so don't hesitate to ask me anything you want to know about the traders or the services offered here."

This woman, Irena, extended her right hand to me. Naturally, I shook it, returning the greeting and introducing myself as... as if the world hadn't stopped, and I was introducing myself to a coworker on my first day at a company.

"Alez Braviel. I've been traveling since the war started, though I haven't left this

city for a few months. I plan to visit often to trade goods."

"And we'll welcome you with open arms every time you do. The commune has been growing recently, and the market is getting busier."

"Do you trade food?"

"And almost anything else you might need."

She had soft, well-kept hands. She was presumably a woman who had never had to lift a weapon against anyone.

She nodded once and stopped looking at me, turning her gaze to my companion, scanning her from head to toe. She gave her a warm smile, but Angelique didn't seem to react. She looked at me as if asking for permission, then extended her hand to Angelique.

"You too, little girl. You can come by whenever you want. What's your name?"

Angelique didn't shake her hand, nor did she speak. She just stared at the woman, who must have looked like an old lady to her, and barely parted her lips as if she were finishing formulating a sentence. I intervened.

"This is Angelique, my companion. We've been traveling together for a few years. It's nothing personal, she just doesn't trust anyone but me."

Overflowing with understanding, Irena turned her eyes back to me.

"That's probably your fault... or thanks to you. I don't think it's a bad thing; trusting others isn't helpful nowadays. That's a privilege only we in the commune can enjoy."

"It must be a relief to have a community to rely on."

"Yes, it is... and there's always room for new members. In fact..."

"No."

That sharp response surprised Irena, but it didn't take long for her to let out a short, dry laugh.

"I understand, I won't insist. It's just that experienced travelers are rare. You know we have protection, but we never refuse an extra pair of hands."

"I don't want to be associated with them, that's all."

"Hm... sure, I can see that. Those emeralds you have for eyes reflect that you've seen a lot. I would dare to guess, but it would be very rude to delve into your past on our first meeting."

"Yes, I'd appreciate it if you didn't. Mainly because I'm almost sure you'd get it right, and then I'd never be able to set foot in this commune again."

"And neither of us wants that, undoubtedly."

We exchanged a mutual chuckle that was cut short by Angelique's words. Words I never thought I'd hear, and that even now make me drop the pencil just by remembering them.

"Angelique Braviel."

Both Irena and I fixed our gaze on Angelique. She showed curiosity, and I, pure surprise.

"I thought..."

"My name is Angelique Braviel. I've been traveling with Alez for three years... I think."

"I thought you weren't siblings."

That tall woman shot me an inquisitive look, though I noticed she was holding back a smile. A strange, unknown force made me turn my face the other way.

"...we're not."

. . .

"Aleksej, are you busy?"

Irena led us to a bald man, without eyebrows and full of wrinkles, the same one who had been trading with the other commune members. They exchanged some words in a language I didn't understand, and I was surprised by the harshness of his voice. I didn't ask, but I was almost certain he had some illness that made speaking difficult. I saw Irena vaguely gesture towards me, and the man gave Angel and me a glance. Without a word, all the people in line for trading began to disperse... but that wasn't all. When I turned out of curiosity, I saw that all potential onlookers had started to move away one by one, leaving the four of us alone. It must have been some kind of code. Some gesture the old man had made must have been interpreted by everyone else as "leave us alone." Irena, however, did

not leave. A few seconds passed, the wind blew, and the man fixed his deep, sunken gray eyes on me.

"You have a secret, don't you?"

The man's English was perfect, even superior to mine at times. I took a breath and got on his level, knowing that a misstep could lead to being rejected by the commune.

"We all have secrets. Mine is none of your concern."

As if we were connected by an ethereal bond, I felt Angelique's muscles tense. The girl was one word away from drawing her gun and starting to shoot. The old man, on his part, threw me a self-satisfied smile; the smile of someone who, though they know they have won, enjoys watching the effort of the losers.

"Time will tell if you're very brave or

very foolish. For now, I welcome you to the commune. My name is Aleksej Lis, and I am the leader here."

"Pleasure to meet you. I am—"

"Alez Braviel and Angelique Braviel. My assistant mentioned it."

I could have sworn I didn't hear those names come out of Irena's mouth, which led me to think they had more ways to play with words than I could recognize.

"Then you know why we're here."

"Braviel, Braviel... your name rings a bell, boy. And that can't be good. Not for you, at least."

"It's not like you care. You're the commune leader; all you care about is knowing exactly how many people live under your rule and how much food comes in each month."

He chuckled softly, getting up from his plastic chair. He was shorter than I

thought; he was as tall as Angelique.

"Amere isn't prone to forgiveness, boy. Just keep that in mind."

I didn't respond, just clicked my tongue in reply.

"Irena, leave us, please. The next words are for his ears and mine only."

It was somewhat terrifying, speaking to this man for the first time. It's not common to find someone out there who is so sure they have everything in the palm of their hand. He didn't hesitate, he didn't stutter, and he didn't even pause to think about his words.

Irena smiled at my companion and, obediently, walked away, disappearing into a nearby house. There was no one around, as if the old man were a magician who had made everyone disappear.

"Is all this fanfare necessary?"

"Don't feel so important, Braviel. This is the procedure for anyone who decides to be our permanent client. You see, it's not as simple as with those who pass through once and never return. No, those who reside nearby can mean the greatest relief or the worst disaster for us. I can read your past, and I'm almost sure you belong to that latter group."

"Your assistant found us trustworthy enough to bring us to you; that should count for something."

"Yes, of course... I trust Irena as I trust myself, and I wouldn't doubt her judgment. But, Irena has this..."

I saw him discreetly shift his gaze to Angelique, who fiercely met that look.

"...bad habit of showing weakness when children are involved. She's a good woman, but her kindness works against her as the commune's assistant."

"Beyond that—"

"Before we continue, Braviel..."

I fell silent and gave him time to think before speaking.

"I asked Irena to leave, and I think you should do the same with your companion. There are things women simply shouldn't hear, Braviel."

Angelique's displeasure transferred to me like an image through a data cable.

I was the first to feel the impact of Aleksej's statement, but after less than a second of thought, part of me understood where he was coming from. I bit my tongue and scratched my chin before glancing at my companion, whose look of incredulity I assume was due to me not rejecting that request immediately.

"Angelique. Step away a bit, but stay in sight. It'll only be a minute."

She's not one to vocalize her complaints in a moment like that, but I could see immense, colossal displeasure and indignation in the shine of her eyes as she looked at me. Then, without a word, she stepped away and focused all her attention on some red flowers across the square. She must have felt betrayed, hurt; I think that was the only time I ever asked something like that of her. Usually, neither of us did anything without the other, as if we were one. I had an urge to run after her and apologize, but I decided to face the bald man and swallow my bad decisions.

"I didn't expect you to agree, to be honest."

"Be brief."

"I will be as brief as I can. Tell me, Braviel, who is that girl really?"

"Why do you care?"

"I'm just a curious guy, nothing more. You want to form a good relationship, don't you? It wouldn't hurt you to satisfy

my curiosity, even a little."

"She's my companion, what more do you need to know?"

"Is she a relative?"

"And what if she were?"

"Then she isn't."

Aleksej was almost as perceptive as Irena, and both knew how to find those small holes in the words that were so easy to exploit. If Irena was an extremely dangerous woman who had decided not to sell herself to those who destroyed this part of the world, then Aleksej was someone who wouldn't hesitate to make as many dirty deals as he could to keep his men in good spirits. He wasn't a soldier, he wasn't with Amere, and he wasn't the leader of a band of thieves. But he could have given the order to kill me right then and there, and surely all those who lived in the commune would have followed it.

What difference did it make?

"Tell me, Alez. You were in the military, right? Did you ever have men under your command?"

I wanted, with all my might, to lie to him, but it was impossible. I don't know what gave me away, but it wasn't difficult for this guy to decipher every aspect of my personality.

"No, I never did. I was almost always the lowest-ranking one."

"I see... it's not easy. No, it's not easy, you know? Having to take charge of people who know they have no choice but to obey you. Many believe command is not much different from machinery, but they're wrong. Humans are more complicated than any machine, and you have to consider many factors before communicating even the simplest news..."

"..."

"We like being complex. We feel it gives us depth. When we—"

"Get to the point. What do you want from me? What do you want from us? I'm a scavenger willing to bring you any valuable goods I find; why drag this conversation out?"

"Because I want to prepare you for what's next, Braviel."

"You're just the leader of a commune, and I'm someone who wants to trade, nothing more. There's nothing that needs too much thought."

"Yes, there is."

"Then be clear already!"

Though my unconscious mind let out an almost shrill cry due to the stress of the situation, the bald man didn't even flinch. Instead, he tilted his head to the side and squinted his eyes.

"How much for your companion?"

"...what?"

"I just said: how much for your companion?"

"...I don't understand."

I did understand.

"You're here to benefit from the trades, and I'm just offering you one more of many."

"...are you asking me to use that girl as a bargaining chip?"

"I don't care how you file it in your head to feel better about yourself. I'm just doing my job as the commune leader."

"..."

"Amere rewards its communes with more and better supplies based on what we can provide them. Weapons are valuable, information even more so, and people... people are a very, very well-valued commodity. A young girl like her would guarantee us at least a year of living here like royalty."

"No."

"A soul is valuable, Braviel. I wouldn't offer you an unfair deal. I can promise you

years of goods. Food, clothing, tools, anything you asked for would be personally offered by me. I'd make sure you never lacked anything for a good while. You'd have—"

"You're just like them."

"Don't hate me, boy. All I care about is the well-being of the commune. It won't keep me up at night to ruin a stranger's life if it means these people live a better day by day."

"Angelique!"

Almost instinctively, I raised my voice. The girl on the other side of the square lifted her head to look at me.

"We're leaving."

"...I understand, I won't insist again. But the offer will stand."

I weighed shooting him.

I imagined the remains of his gray matter splattering onto the pavement

while the commune's inhabitants came out to hunt me down, weapons in hand. A small part of me thought it might be worth it.

In the periphery of my vision, I saw Angelique approaching. My face must have been a sight because she placed a hand on my forearm and said what she had been holding back.

"Let's go, Alez."

I broke the stare I had with Aleksej and turned, striding away while using all my self-control to avoid turning the place into a war zone.

It wasn't his lack of morality that bothered me.

It wasn't that he was a piece of trash.

It wasn't that he was willing to be the worst scum anyone could be.

It wasn't that, even knowing what it would mean for a girl like her to be handed over to Amere, he could do it

without blinking.

No, it wasn't any of that.

What tempted me to disfigure his face with punches and bullets was that he had thought about doing it with Angelique. Just the thought drove me crazy. I probably wouldn't have been as enraged to learn that it wouldn't have been the first time. No, none of that. All that enraged me was the mere idea that Angelique could fall into something like that.

Nothing, not even death, would be worse than a fate like that.

On the way back, leaving the commune, I crossed paths again with Irena, who by then felt like a ghost inhabiting every corner of the place. Just by looking into my eyes, she understood that I wasn't willing to exchange even a word with her. She smiled at Angelique and watched us pass, speaking behind our backs.

"You can come to trade anytime you want, Alez and Angelique. Whatever you discussed with Aleksej, I hope it doesn't

close the door to future exchanges between us."

Neither she nor I responded, and we continued on our way.

. . .

I couldn't calm down on the way back, and Angelique didn't speak to me, though I knew she was dying to. I imagined more than twenty ways to kill that man. Some included taking down the entire commune, others assassinating him silently, and others taking him with me. I had to kill him. I needed to kill him. I wanted to kill him. I couldn't let someone who saw those kinds of opportunities in Angelique live. He was dangerous. Not because he would try to take her by force, but because the very idea posed a danger to her.

The more I walked, the more the rage consumed me. I opened the door to our house almost violently and entered, taking

off my coat and letting it fall onto the couch. I walked to the kitchen and placed my handgun on the table, then rummaged through the top shelf of the pantry, where I knew there was still half a bottle of vodka. I was almost blind, not even aware of my own breathing.

I returned to the dining room, and there was Angelique, watching me as impassively as always. She saw me push the coat aside to sit at the small table and open the bottle.

"Alez."

I didn't respond. I took a swig and felt the liquid burn my throat, so I took another to numb my sense of taste.

He wouldn't come for us. He would never dare, but knowing that wasn't enough for me. My mind wouldn't calm down until I saw him dead. But I couldn't do that, of course. Taking on an entire commune by killing its leader would be a fatal mistake that would very easily cost us

our lives.

"Alez..."

I took another swig and put the bottle down on the table.

The muscles in my jaw tensed involuntarily when I remembered that old man's proposition. The audacity, the damn boldness he had to even suggest that he could improve my life at Angelique's expense. I didn't want to teach Aleksej a lesson; I just wanted to satisfy my urge to see him clutching his stomach, trying in vain to keep his guts inside.

I gave in and picked up the bottle again, deciding to keep drinking. Angelique remained standing by the door, looking at me with that same expression she always has every second, minute, and hour.

"Hey, Alez—"

"Don't you realize that I don't feel like talking? Do me a favor and lower your fucking voice, okay? It's irritating."

My mouth, which said words I didn't want to say, and my eyes, which spat disdain at my companion, moved before I could realize what I had just done. There was silence, and her only reaction was to lower her shoulders almost imperceptibly. That movement made the wings on her back drop a few centimeters, as if they, instead of her eyes, were allowed to express the pain of a wound.

"..."

I lowered my gaze and rubbed my face, massaging over my eyebrows while internally cursing myself with hundreds of insults. Of course, when I looked up, her wings were no longer there.

I swallowed, defeated.

"Angel... please, sit here."

She nodded once and without hesitation or shyness, took a seat beside me. She stared at the bottle for a few seconds but didn't reach for it. Angelique prefers sweet liquors.

I scratched my chin for a few seconds and honestly wished Angelique could punch me. I deserved, at the very least, for her to retreat to her room in offense. I deserved something, any kind of punishment would have suited me.

So, I took another swig of vodka.

"Tell me, what have you been reading lately?"

She turned her face to look at me, as if trying to decipher my expression. I'm sure she saw me looking tired, maybe a bit distressed. She thought for a long time and then mimicked my gesture of scratching my chin.

"I found a book of... children's stories. It

has fables and such. It's cute."

"I didn't imagine you'd be interested in that sort of thing."

"Neither did I. I picked it up out of curiosity, but I think it's one of my favorites."

"I see..."

"Mhm..."

"Which one was your favorite?"

"There was one set in a kitchen. It was about a new knife that had arrived, but he didn't know that the rest of the knives were hiding on purpose so that the kitchen owner couldn't find them and they wouldn't have to cut their friends, the vegetables."

"That sounds... silly."

"It's cute."

We exchanged glances once more, and the urge to smile took over me.

"Why is it cute?"

"The ending has a nice message."

"Ah, that's why..."

I was about to take another swig but decided against it. I rested my head on the back of the couch and closed my eyes, trying to dissolve all the tension in my body that refused to disperse.

"Tell me it."

"Huh?"

"Tell me the story. If you say it's so cute, then I hope I'll like it too."

I think she thought about it for a few seconds, and then I felt her sit a little closer, letting our legs touch. She cleared her throat and lowered her voice a bit.

"One morning, like any other, all the cutlery in the kitchen's top drawer were awakened by the oldest and biggest knife of all, who brought shocking news..."

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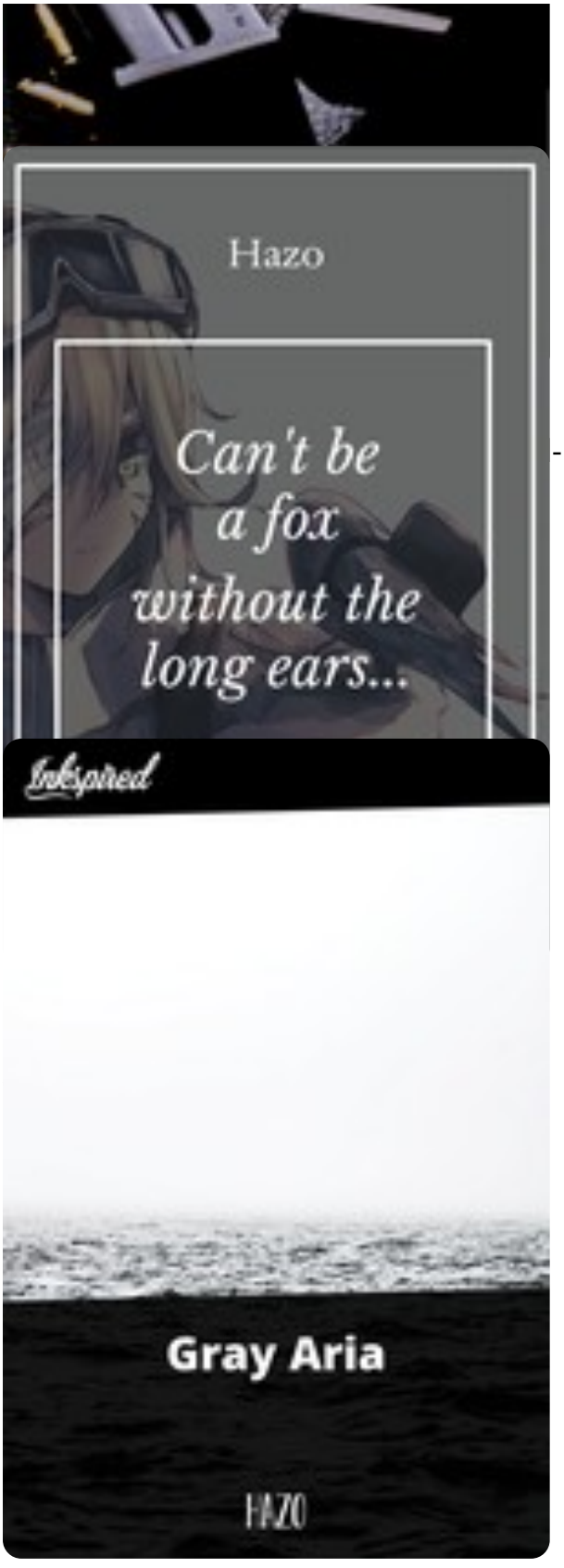

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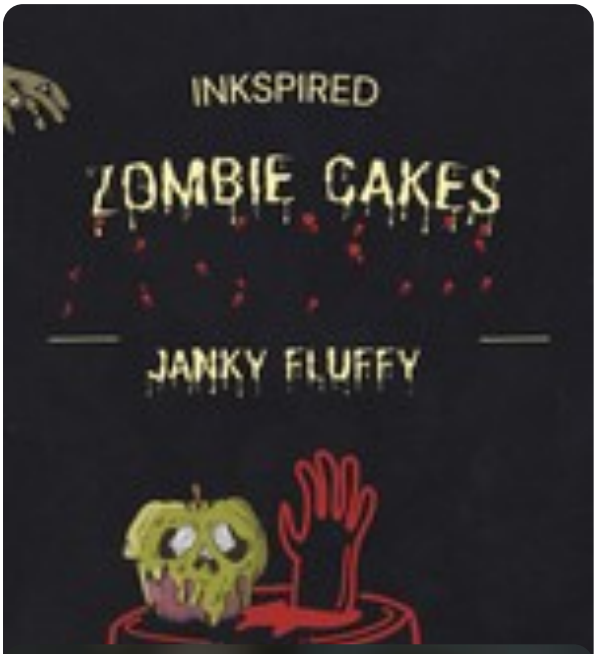

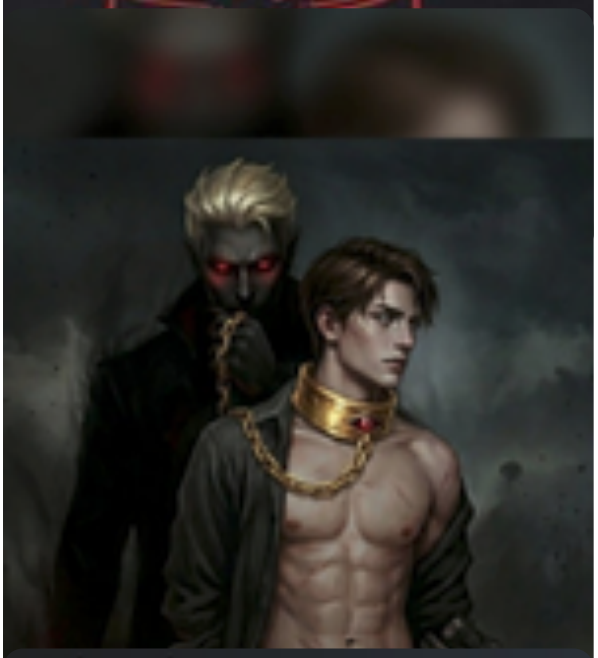

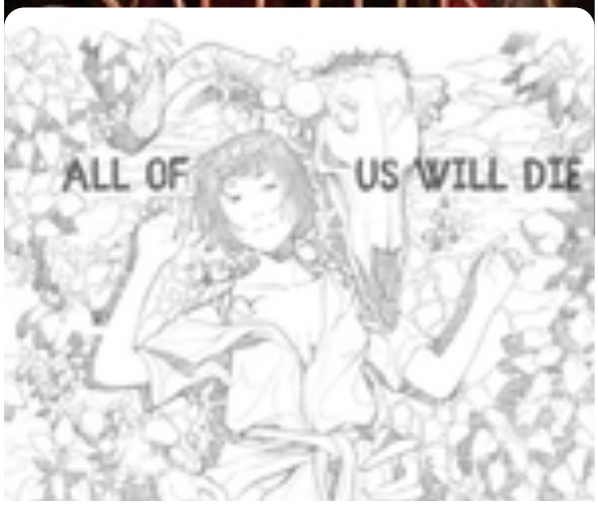

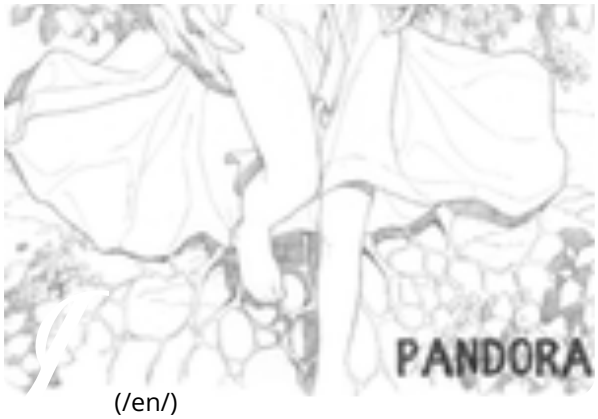

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